Introduction

Few scholars have offered a better portrait of the difficulties inherent in the study of ritual than the anthropologist Victor Turner, who in 1969 observed of his own work on the rituals of the Ndembu people,

> It is true that almost from the beginning of my stay among the Ndembu I had, on invitation, attended the frequent performances of the girls' puberty rites (*Nkang'a*) and had tried to describe what I had seen as accurately as possible. But it is one thing to observe people performing the stylized gestures and singing the cryptic songs of ritual performances and quite another to reach an adequate understanding of what the words and movements mean to *them*.[1]

For social historians of the Roman world, Turner's remarks ring especially true, for the problem of determining the meaning behind ancient rituals is compounded by chronological distance from long-dead informants and frustrating gaps in evidence. And in the case of the Roman wedding, we depend almost exclusively on upper-class male authors to reveal the meaning of a ceremony in which a young woman's transition to married life was the primary focus. Did the events of a Roman wedding and the thoughts and feelings of its participants (especially the bride), described by ancient sources, resemble in any way the reality of the ceremony? Even if we sifted through all the known evidence for Roman weddings, collected the elements common to each, and said with relative certainty that these were the rites and rituals of the Roman wedding known to Romans of that historical period, this ceremony – this amalgam wedding – would be our own creation, and not the experience

[1] Turner 1969: 7.

of any one Roman. Because as surely as each Roman author sought to highlight different aspects of the ceremony to serve his literary aims, each ancient author's description of the Roman wedding reflects only one reality.[2]

We begin our investigation of the Roman wedding by remarking that many cultures, both ancient and modern, recognize the wedding as a significant transition that marks progression in a human's life. Indeed, the formal union of a man and a woman[3] in wedlock is a basic event that many cultures mark with distinctive social rites – and the Romans were no different. But unlike most Roman religious rituals and public celebrations, which were dominated by men, the Roman wedding involved Roman women in prominent and unusually public roles. This book examines the role of women in the wedding by considering the ancient literary testimony for the Roman ritual in light of the material evidence for Roman marriage and with the help of methodologies derived from social history. We confront two related questions: How can a study of the ritual elements of the Roman wedding, a ceremony that took place under the aegis of women, help us to reevaluate our understanding of women's roles in Roman society? How do these elements reflect the roles that women were expected to play in their married lives?

It will be necessary at the outset to examine one rather obvious point about the wedding: the focus on women. In the majority of descriptions of Roman weddings, Roman authors focus on women's involvement in the ceremony, from the female relatives who bedeck the bride, to the woman – married only once – who, some modern scholars assert, joins the hands of the couple in marriage (the *pronuba*), to the binding phrase spoken by the bride, "*Ubi tu Gaius, ego Gaia*." Apart from the *auspex* (one who seeks omens) and the groom, men stand largely in the background; we hear little about the groom's role in the ceremony, save that he offers the bride fire and water as she enters their new dwelling (his house, in fact). Even in an anomalous wedding, such as the debauched wedding of

[2] For the difficulties in reconstructing marriage practice, see the thoughtful remarks of G. Duby in the first chapter of his groundbreaking work *Medieval Marriage* (1978).

[3] Roman jurists defined the wedding as the joining of man and woman: *D.* 23.2.1; *Inst.* 1.9.1.

the emperor Nero to his castrated boy-servant Sporus, we see a certain emphasis on (or rather, conservatism in the preservation of) the bride's accoutrements. Suetonius is careful to record that Nero covered Sporus with the *flammeum*, the traditional red-gold veil worn by the bride. In so doing, he shows the degree of Nero's insanity and at the same time reinforces the idea that the bride's clothes "make" the ceremony.[4] Roman authors focused on the bride because the wedding represented a Roman girl's initiation into the adult Roman world. Roman boys had a formal ceremony at which they doffed the *toga praetexta* and donned the *toga virilis*,[5] but there is no evidence of an equivalent initiation ritual for girls. A girl put aside her *toga praetexta* just before her wedding. A bride was expected to come to her groom a virgin, but there is no evidence to suggest that virginity was a prerequisite for marriage for the groom.[6] It is clear that the wedding symbolized a great change in lifestyle for both the bride and groom, but the change was more significant for the bride.

Because the ancient Roman couple likely would have opted to leave out certain portions of ritual and to include others,[7] can a "Roman wedding" ceremony be understood as a singular, discrete "ritual"? How do we assemble a picture of the Roman wedding, descriptions of which surface in works by authors as distant from one another in time as in subject matter? Can we learn anything from the comparison of the details of the comical and bizarre transvestite wedding in Plautus' *Casina* and Apuleius' description of his own wedding in his *Apology*? To form our picture of the rituals involved in the Roman wedding, we must rely on sources as diverse as the wedding songs of Catullus[8] and Statius, Festus' encyclopedic definitions of elements of the wedding ceremony, and the

[4] Suet. *Nero* 28.1. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.37.9.

[5] Rawson (1991: 28) notes that "There was no comparable civic rite of passage for girls, as they never became full citizens in the political sense of voting and standing for office, and they were never eligible for military service." Cf. Torelli 1984, Caldwell 2007: 210.

[6] Quite the opposite; boys were expected to sow wild oats. Compare, for example, the young male protagonists of the plays of Plautus and the groom in Catull. 61.

[7] As Susan Treggiari (1991: 161) noted at the beginning of her chapter on the Roman wedding ceremony.

[8] Catull. 61, 62, and 64.

moralizing views of Plutarch in his *Roman Questions*. But epithalamia are formal, occasional poems, with deep roots in the Greek epithalamic tradition, beginning with Sappho and, more notably for the purpose of understanding Roman adaptations, culminating in the Hellenistic period with Theocritus. We must turn to Festus' dictionary to understand ritual elements in the epithalamia. Festus gives valuable descriptions of the accoutrements (e.g., *fax, hasta caelibaris, corolla*) and personages (e.g., *auspex, pronuba, camilli*) likely to appear at a Roman wedding but does little to explain the significance of these objects and figures or how each ranks in importance. We want to know which elements were in use during which period and whether all weddings were likely to have all of the elements listed by Festus. In fact, we are able to get only partial answers to these questions. We must turn to Plutarch's *Roman Questions*, in which he conjectures about why, for example, the Romans used a spear to part the bride's hair. But we must always exercise caution when attempting to mine the *Roman Questions* for information about Roman society, because Plutarch's explanations, troubled by his moralizing and lack of editing of his sources, sometimes can obscure our understanding of Roman ritual and daily living.[9]

The formal descriptions in Catullus' and Statius' epithalamia, the encyclopedic entries of Festus, and Plutarch's learned guesses answer many of our questions about the minutiae of the ceremony: what the bride wore, who carried torches, of what material the torches were made, and so on. These passages provide clues about the raw materials from which the Romans built the wedding and are therefore useful; however, they represent only one type of evidence about the Roman wedding. They do not provide a clear picture of what the Romans found important about each element nor even a statement about the wedding as a complete ceremony. For answers to these types of questions, we must turn to the odd collection of descriptions of weddings in a variety of literary sources, from Plautus to Apuleius.

[9] Humbert (1972: 1–11) points out that Plutarch's assumption that Roman remarriage ceremonies were ill-attended because of the shame attached to them has led scholars to believe (incorrectly) that all Roman remarriages were ill-attended and somehow shameful.

We know then that the only conclusions we can draw with certainty about the Roman wedding ceremony is that every ceremony was different. Even so, historians who have studied the Roman wedding understandably have been obliged, for the sake of their readers, to present a version of the Roman wedding that is in fact an amalgam, a composite Roman wedding based on various descriptions of wedding ceremonies in Roman literature. For this reason we must unpack not only the ancient testimony but also the trail of modern scholarship to show that many of the events and accoutrements that some modern scholars emphasize as vital parts of the Roman wedding in fact were not indispensible.

We briefly survey existing scholarship on the Roman wedding and set it within the context of recent developments in the study of the history of Roman religion, family, and society. Early antiquarian works on Roman marriage collected most of the ancient literary testimony but did little to interpret wedding ritual yet these early works became the basis for our standardized view of the Roman wedding ceremony. The necessarily brief sketches of the wedding in the great handbooks, left unchallenged and repeated throughout decades of classical scholarship, have often led to more, rather than less, confusion about what Roman wedding ritual comprised. Important recent studies of Roman marriage have focused largely on the legal aspects or origins of Roman marriage, and recent work on Roman women has focused on the institution of marriage rather than on women's roles in the rituals of the wedding. At the end of this introduction, I present some of the larger questions about the wedding that will be of interest to us throughout the book.

The study of the wedding in its own right was last undertaken by August Rossbach in his *Untersuchungen über die Römische Ehe* (1853). Rossbach devoted nearly two-thirds of his book to the legal aspects of Roman marriage; the remaining third discusses wedding ritual with a view to advancing his thesis that the Roman wedding ceremony was connected to the cult of agrarian gods. In the scholarly late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century handbooks of Roman private life and religion (Blümner 1911, Friedländer 1874, Marquardt 1886, Wissowa 1912), scholars continued the conversation on the wedding begun by Rossbach, offering some new interpretations and arguments; however, given the size of the handbooks, discussions on the wedding necessarily occupied

limited space. At the same time, advances in anthropology provided new frameworks for understanding the wedding – for example, as a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1909) – and generated new interest in placing the Roman wedding within a cross-cultural context (Rage-Brocard 1934) and in understanding marriage in Roman law and society (Corbett 1930). By the latter half of the twentieth century, a student of antiquity could find discussions and speculations on all aspects of the Roman wedding in texts of every field of Roman studies – examples include works on the Roman family (Bradley 1991, Dixon 1988, Harlow and Laurence 2002, Rawson 1991, Shaw 1987); Roman remarriage (Humbert 1972); Roman religion (Dumézil 1966, 1979, Versnel 1994), including individual gods and priestesses (Beard 1980, 1995, Boëls-Janssen, 1993, Spaeth 1996, Staples 1998, Takács 2008, Wildfang 2006); Roman art and archaeology (Koch and Sichtermann 1982, Reinsberg 2006, Torelli 1984, Von Blanckenhagen, 1975); and gender and Roman law (Balsdon 1962, Evans Grubbs 1995, 2007, Gardner 1986) and individual literary studies, commentaries, dictionaries, and encyclopedias too numerous to mention.

Interest in the wedding increased after the publication of Susan Treggiari's *Roman Marriage* (1991). This indispensable study focuses primarily on the legal aspects of matrimony but includes a brief, although thorough, discussion of the wedding ceremony itself. Treggiari does not limit her research to statutes set forth in Justinian's *Digest* but incorporates literary, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence to produce the most complete picture of Roman marriage since Rossbach's *Die Römische Ehe* (1853).[10] Treggiari approached marriage using evidence gathered from many types of text so that her readers would, insofar as possible, understand the "Roman experience of marriage."[11] Her work must be the starting point for all future studies of Roman marriage. But because ritual was not her interest, Treggiari has left room for others to explore the social, religious, and cultural significance of the Roman wedding ceremony.[12] Nicole Boëls-Janssen, in her book *La vie Religieuse*

[10] The absence of Rossbach's books from Treggiari's bibliography may show the differences in their interests.
[11] Treggiari 1991: preface vii.
[12] However, see Treggiari 1994.

des Matrones dans la Rome Archaïque (1993), devoted four chapters to the rituals involved in the Roman wedding and helpfully grounded her interpretations of the elements of the wedding in the opinions of Rossbach. Sabine Horstmann's *Das Epithalamium in der lateinischen Literatur der Spätantike* examines not only the wedding poems of its title but also early epithalamia embedded in comedy, epic, and tragedy. Like *Roman Marriage*, Boëls-Janssen's and Horstmann's monumental undertakings could not allow exhaustive treatment of every aspect of the wedding. Finally, John Oakley and Rebecca Sinos provided an excellent introduction to the Greek wedding, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, in 1993. The authors of this crucial work guide the reader through the events leading to the wedding (e.g., betrothal, preparations for the ceremony) and then take us on a walk through the wedding day as they have reconstructed it from literary and artistic evidence.

The present study of each of the elements of the Roman wedding ceremony (e.g., bridal accoutrements, ritual phrases, ritual acts), when studied against the backdrop of other Roman religious practices (e.g., those of the Vestal Virgins), will lead to a greater understanding of how the wedding compares with other ceremonies in which women figured prominently. We may then be better able to recognize the significance of descriptions of weddings and wedding motifs in Latin literature. The wedding encompasses Roman law, religion, and culture and tradition, and what I have had the time and space to attempt in this book that my predecessors did not is to investigate in detail each aspect of the wedding left to us by antiquity and, as far as possible, to set its events and accoutrements into the wider context of Roman life.

The first chapter examines the relationship of the Roman wedding to the laws Romans believed were ordained by humans or gods. To this end, I briefly investigate the requirements for legal marriage and betrothal, and the Roman jurists' opinions on the meaning of the word *nuptiae*, and then examine the array of evidence concerning days on which Romans could wed. Our legal evidence comes primarily from Gaius' *Institutes* and from the *Digest*, a massive compendium of the law commissioned by Justinian in the sixth century CE that contains excerpts from the writings of Roman lawyers of preceding centuries. Scholars of law urge caution when mining these excerpts, because, for example, interpolations abound and we cannot always distinguish between fictional and nonfictional

cases.[13] In this chapter, I ask: In whose lives did the "laws of men and gods" really interfere? And would most Romans have been aware of these laws? We will therefore confront for the first time perhaps the most significant question of this study: Whose wedding are we reconstructing? Because our evidence emerges, in the main, from the styluses of upper-class man, what can we know about the weddings of those able to afford little pomp? And, because the customs and religion of Romans represented a blending of ancient cultures, what does the "Roman" mean in "Roman wedding"?

The second chapter investigates the costume of the bride and the events that took place at her home, and the third chapter looks at the leading of the bride to her new home and the events there. The elements of the bride's costume were of such great antiquity that they have remained a source of controversy among scholars of Roman literature, art, and culture. Past students of the Roman wedding have presented a composite bride's outfit culled from different sources: this amalgam does not correspond to the outfit of any particular bride known to us from extended descriptions of the ceremony. From the few longer descriptions of Roman weddings that survive, it is often impossible to determine exactly when certain events took place, which items of clothing were popular and when, or indeed if any were used by the "average" Roman. In these chapters, I investigate the literary and antiquarian evidence to uncover the sequence of events of the wedding and then ask whether the events took place at all.

In the fourth chapter, I investigate the relationship of the Roman wedding to gods and priestesses of Rome. While no source neglects to mention gods in connection to the wedding, few sources agree on which god or goddess was believed to oversee the wedding, and even fewer sources comment on prayers or sacrifices performed in their honor. Furthermore, it appears that the mention of any god or goddess at any particular wedding in Roman literary sources seems more a concern of genre than a reflection of the actual practices of the Roman wedding in any century; problematically, these same gods rarely coincide with the gods highlighted by antiquarians. Moreover, we note that the presence of priestly garb at the wedding was attached solely to the bride: the

[13] Crook 1967: 13–18.

bride, said antiquarians, wore garments imitating the daily vestments of both the Vestal Virgins and the *Flaminica Dialis*. Adorned with the hairstyle of the Vestal and the veil of the *Flaminica*, the bride was cloaked by symbols of her past and future: she brought to her husband both unassailable virginity and the promise of matronly fidelity. The bride's clothing gave onlookers a symbolic résumé of respectable Roman woman's life, as she walked between maidenhood and matronhood as a living symbol of liminality.

The fifth and final chapter attempts to show that by understanding the wedding in the light of rites of passage, we can perhaps better interpret the negative portrayals of the wedding in Roman literature. The Roman wedding was a ceremony of concern to ancient experts of the law and religion, but this ceremony was not a prerequisite to legal marriage nor did it necessarily invite the participation of, or sacrifices to, particular gods. Yet it seems that some of the apparent oddities of the Roman wedding ceremony are shared by a number of other Roman rites and celebrations, including (but not limited to) the assumption of the *toga virilis*, the funeral, and the triumph. The interplay and near-inseparability of law, religion, and custom in the wedding should be viewed against the backdrop of these peculiarly Roman celebrations in which the publicity of the event seems to have been the *sine qua non*.

Was the wedding a legal act? The answer must be "yes and no." Certainly the wedding ceremony seems at first glance to be of great legal significance, the point from which jurists (and writers of epitaph) measured the duration of a legal marriage; moreover, many Roman weddings were preceded by a legally binding engagement, a verbal agreement between two men. But a wedding ceremony was not necessary in the creation of a legal marriage, which could be formed by living together for a stated period: this type of marriage, *usus*, by definition needed no wedding ceremony to form it. We should add to this that men and women living in Italy during the period I investigate (approximately 200 BCE to 200 CE) – slaves, same-sex couples, one adulterous empress – who had no hope of a legal marriage resulting from their nuptials, may have celebrated weddings with all of the trappings they could afford. Finally, Roman jurists noted cases in which underage girls lived with their grooms before marriage; the attainment of the appropriate age, not

a wedding ceremony, made them wives.[14] In sum, sometimes a wedding represents a legally binding beginning of a legal Roman marriage, and sometimes it does not.

Should we consider the wedding then to be a religious rite, connected fundamentally to the religion and gods of the Romans? On the one hand, it seems the answer is no: the wedding may not have been celebrated in honor of particular deities, and only one extended description of the wedding specifies the gods to whom sacrifices were made before or during the ceremony.[15] On the other hand, every single Roman epithalamium – whether written for clients or friends or merely as a literary exercise – includes an invocation to, or the presence of, what seems to be a presiding deity or deities. Representations of marrying (or married) couples on Roman sarcophagi may include the gods Concordia, Cupid, Hymenaeus and Venus. In addition, Roman antiquarians asserted that many of the rituals of the wedding had ties to both domestic rites and rites publicly performed in the city of Rome (and, furthermore, to crucial events in Roman history). But as we have already asked: Whose wedding? To this we may add: Whose religion?[16]

If the wedding was not strictly necessary in the formation of a legal marriage, and was also not technically a religious rite, can we at least view the wedding as a rite of passage? Yes for the bride; no for the groom. The majority of the many explanations of the rites and accoutrements of the wedding focus on the bride and her transition from *virgo* (maiden) to *matrona* (married woman), yet few authors mention changes in the lifestyle of the groom, and we therefore assume that the attention of the onlookers and participants was focused on the bride. Moreover, the wedding does not seem to have made a girl into a woman: we have already noted that a girl, too young to be legally married, was sometimes transferred to her husband's home and attained the status of wife when she reached the minimum legal age. For this bride, her *domum deductio* (transfer to her husband's home) may have appeared to be (or perhaps was) a wedding, but this wedding did not mark the beginning of a legal marriage.

[14] See Caldwell 2007.
[15] Sen. *Med.* 59–66.
[16] Beard, North, and Price 1998, Rüpke 2007.